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Analytical Brief Précis analytique



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Freedom Convoy 2022 – The Imagery and Significance of Flags

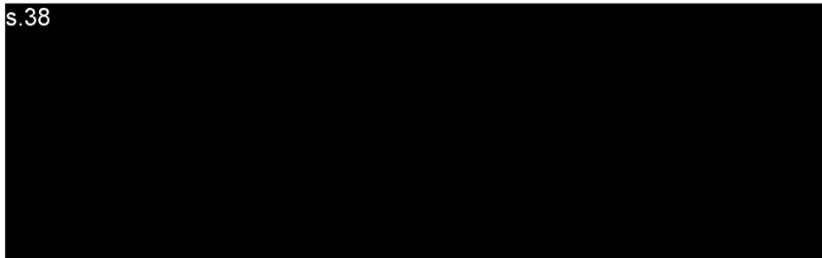
The Freedom Convoy 2022 drew thousands of protestors to downtown Ottawa – most significantly on January 29 and 30. While broadly united in their opposition to public health measures that have been imposed in response to COVID-19 and their strong dislike of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—and the federal government in general—the protestors were not homogenous in either their grievances or organization. The purpose of this assessment is to examine the presence, usage and significance of flags during the weekend protest. s.38

Key Points

- The Canadian flag was the most prevalent flag on display in the crowd, likely reflecting participants' belief that they are patriotic Canadians standing up for their democratic rights. s.3
- A small number of flags (both purchased and self-created) reflected racist and bigoted worldviews. The presence of these flags, however, is not unique to this event and are often seen at anti-lockdown/mandate events across the country. s.38



s.38



- Without greater context, the presence of flags that are publicly linked to various extreme groups is not necessarily a reflection of group membership of the bearer. s.3



Background

In response to the Government of Canada's federal vaccine mandate requiring all truck drivers crossing the border to be fully vaccinated as of January 15, 2022, a national event entitled "Freedom Convoy 2022" was launched via a social media fundraiser, with the goal of scaling back COVID-19 mandate measures. The convoy is part of the broader

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anti-public health restrictions movement.¹ As with any movement, only a small, fringe element supports the use of violence or might be willing to engage in it. s.38

United in their opposition to all public health restrictions and to the policies of the prime minister, protestors espoused a range of grievances, including s.38

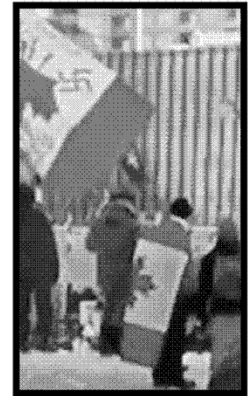
- COVID-19 is fake and/or its impact is overstated by government;
- Vaccinations are a personal choice and individuals should not be forced to vaccinate;
- Public health mandates represent an overreach of a 'tyrannical government';
- Public health mandates are part of a broader globalist conspiracy; and,
- Public health mandates represent broader pseudo-law, whereby individuals must consent to all restrictions.

The Relevance of Flags

Over the course of the weekend, hundreds of flags representing a broad range of grievances and narratives were visible across downtown Ottawa. The Canadian flag and, to a lesser degree, provincial flags, were the most prevalent among displayed flags, likely reflecting participants' views that they are patriotic Canadians (see image at right). Some flags were flown upside down, likely as an indication of the bearer's belief that nation is in distress. American flags were also prominent among the crowd, likely representing solidarity with American truckers. s.38

Within the crowd were a very small number of flags bearing racist and/or bigoted imagery; these flags likely reflect the worldviews of the holder. These included the Confederate flag and Nazi flags; others included offensive statements directed at the prime minister. These flags can be easily purchased online; the anti-Trudeau flag, for example, is available for sale on Amazon.ca (see image on previous page right). s.38

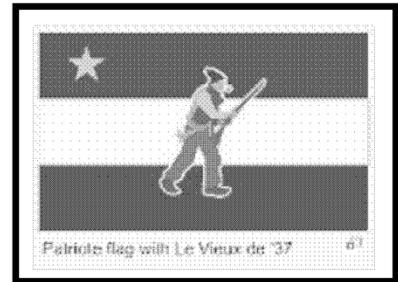
A small number of individuals displayed hand-written statements or images on their flags in an attempt to focus their message. Specifically, several added a swastika to their flag, not necessarily to self-identify as Nazis/ national socialists, but to imply that the prime minister and federal government are acting like Nazis / national socialists by imposing public health mandates. s.38



¹ For additional information, see *Defining Movements in the IMVE Space* – CSIS Assessment, 2022 01 12. S//CEO

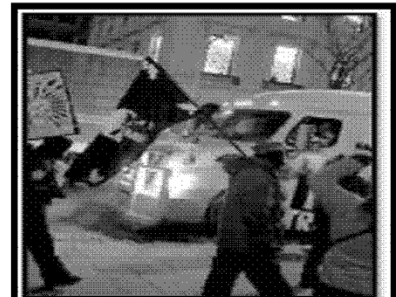
Aside from individuals who specifically identified themselves as part of the convoy group, the Service is unaware of the presence of IMVE groups at this weekend's protest. Within the larger protest, however, were a small number of flags that were publicly linked to groups that espouse racist/bigoted and anti-government views. Often, these flags have been used by more than one group/cause, thereby making it difficult to determine any particular allegiance of the bearer without additional context and nuance. s.38

The Patriote flag (see image above) is a popular symbol of Quebec nationalism, but has also been adopted by at least one ideologically extreme, but nonviolent, group—Storm Alliance. Likewise, the 'punisher' image (see image next page) was seen on several flags over the weekend. Like the Patriote flag, this image is used by various groups and movements and cannot, without greater understanding, link the bearer to a specific entity. s.38



The Gadsden flag ('Don't Tread On Me') was also spotted at the protest. Associated with antigovernment movements and causes primarily in the United States, the flag—or a variation of it—is common at anti-public health mandate protests in Canada. The flag does not necessarily link the bearer to a specific entity. s.38

Seemingly unrelated flags were also visible at the protest, including the Mohawk warrior flag. While the true purpose of the flag at the protest is unclear, it is highly unlikely that it represented the presence of 'Mohawk warriors'. s.38



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Implications

Flags have the ability to both promote a message and possibly influence others. The presence of racist and bigoted flags appear to have been brought by individuals who would like others to believe that their cause or belief is far greater and more organized than it actually is. CSIS assesses that these flags were not part of a broader group initiative. That said, such flags pose a threat to the fabric of Canadian society. s.38

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Freedom of expression is constitutionally protected in Canada; CSIS investigative thresholds may be met once a threat actor facilitates or advocates for serious violence in support or furtherance of ideological, political or religious objectives with the intent of affecting societal change. CSIS does not investigate lawful advocacy, protest or dissent, unless it is carried out in conjunction with any of the activities outlined in paragraphs 2(a) to (d) of the *CSIS Act*.

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